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SUBJECT: Embassy Tunis Opens First American Corner in
Tunisia

¶1. Summary. In January 2006, in the presence of close to 200 Tunisians, the Ambassador inaugurated the first American Corner in the country at the Tunis AMIDEAST headquarters. In his speech to a wide range of government officials, journalists, students, academics, and civil society partners, the Ambassador cited the number of ongoing USG exchange programs in support of Tunisian students as well as the importance of sustained dialogue and mutual understanding. The inauguration was covered in two Tunisian daily newspapers and one weekly newspaper, reaching close to 110,000 readers. Over the past two months, interest in the Corner has been growing as it has become the site of weekly film showings and Embassy programming. End Summary.

The Quest for the Perfect Partner

¶2. After close to two years of resistance on the part of the Tunisian government to hosting an American Corner at a Tunisian public library or university, Embassy Tunis began to consider another obvious partner, the American NGO AMIDEAST. In addition to helping manage the Fulbright program and other USG student exchanges in Tunisia, AMIDEAST provides student advising on American universities. More importantly to our purposes for the American Corner, AMIDEAST provides English classes for all ages and socioeconomic groups. They currently teach English to over 800 Tunisians each year. Located close to downtown Tunis, AMIDEAST is open to the public and is already an attractive destination for those interested in studying English and learning more about America. The director of AMIDEAST Tunis was pleased to host an American Corner, designating an open and sunny area, directly at the front of the AMIDEAST building, as the home to our collection. He also appointed a young, eloquent, and active staff member as the American Corner director, while assigning two other AMIDEAST staff members to assist her.

Opening Sets the Stage

¶3. On January 25, 2006, the AMIDEAST director and the Ambassador together opened the first American Corner in Tunisia. Over 200 Tunisians, including students, journalists, government officials, university faculty, and civil society representatives, were present at the event. In his remarks, the Ambassador recalled the long friendship between the Tunisian and American people, the number of student exchanges that existed between our two countries, and the importance of continuing dialogue and mutual understanding. Both the speech and the initiative of the American Corner were well-received by the guests as many reminisced of the "good old days" when the American Cultural Center was located downtown and was a hub of student activity. Entertainment at the event was provided by

Embassy Poloff Brennan Gilmore, who sang a variety of American songs of all genres to the delight of the Tunisian audience gathered around him. This event was announced by two daily newspapers and covered by a third weekly paper, reaching over 110,000 Tunisians.

Good Start

14. Since its inauguration, the American Corner, which is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., has seen a small but steady stream of daily visitors, many of whom are students at AMIDEAST but others who are simply interested passers-by. The Director of the Corner instituted a biweekly American film showing which revives an old, and fondly remembered, tradition from the days when the American Center was located in downtown Tunis. The Director, with the US Embassy, has programmed three programs over the past two months, to include a presentation on the Blues by the Embassy Medical Officer, a poetry reading by a Tunisian poet who writes in English, and a lecture by visiting NASA scientist Dr. Joe Davila (reftel). The attendance varied widely, but reached 70 students for the program with the American scientist. There are currently two American AISEC (an international exchange organization) interns helping to staff the American Corner and to assist with programming, which has also helped to bring extra insight into America to the visitors to the Corner.

Looking Ahead

15. The American Corner provides a new and exciting program platform for the Embassy, particularly given its location closer to the heart of Tunis. In this regard, we are designing a series of programs in the month of April, to include an extensive American Studies series, aimed at advertising the American Corner and attracting a wide

variety of audiences. Thanks to an ongoing State Partnership between the state of Wyoming and Tunisia, we also recently made contact with the Wyoming State Library, who is interested in partnering with the American Corner in Tunis. The PA section is currently collecting books from departing FSO's so that we can begin a lending library - this will serve both as a means of funding for the American Corner as well as an additional attraction to perspective clients. We will continue to develop this first project as we begin to search for partners for a second Corner in Tunisia.

HUDSON